***East of Eden*, Chapter 34 (1952)**

A child may ask, 'What is the world's story about?' And a grown man or woman may wonder, 'What way will the world go? How does it end and, while we're at it, what's the story about?'

I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us, so that we live in a Pearl White serial of continuing thought and wonder. Humans are caught in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too -- in a net of good and evil. I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence. Virtue and vice were warp and woof (old terms for weaving cloth) of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last, and this despite changes we might impose on field and river and mountain, on economy and manners. There is no other story. A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well -- or ill?

Herodotus, in the Persian War, tells a story of how Croesus, the richest and most favored King of his time, asked Solon the Athenian, a leading question. He would not have asked it if he had he not been worried about the answer. 'Who,' he asked, 'is the luckiest person in the world?' He must have been eaten with doubt, and hungry for reassurance. Solon told him of three lucky people in old times. And Croesus more than likely did not listen; so anxious was he about himself. And when Solon did not mention him, Croesus was forced to say, 'Do you consider me lucky?' Solon did not hesitate in his answer. 'How can I tell?' he said. 'You aren't dead yet.' And this answer must have haunted Croesus dismally as his luck disappeared, and his wealth and his kingdom. And as he was being burned on a tall fire, he may have thought of it and perhaps wished he had not asked or not been answered.

And in our time, when a man dies -- if he has had wealth and influence, power and all the vestments that arouse envy, and after the living take stock of the dead man's property and his eminence and works and monuments -- the question is still there: Was his life good or was it evil? -- which is another way of putting Croesus's question. Envies are gone, and the measuring stick is: Was he loved or was he hated? Is his death felt as a loss or does a kind of joy come of it?

I remember clearly the deaths of three men. One was the richest man of the century, who, having clawed his way to wealth through the souls and bodies of men, spent many years trying to buy back the love he had forfeited and by that process performed great service to the world and, perhaps, had much more than balanced the evils of his rise. I was on a ship when he died. The news was posted on the bulletin board, and nearly everyone received the news with pleasure. Several said 'Thank God that son of a bitch is dead.'

Then there was a man, smart as Satan, who, lacking some perception of human dignity and knowing all too well every aspect of human weakness and wickedness, used his special knowledge to warp men, to buy men, to bribe and threaten and seduce until he found himself in a position of great power. He clothed his motives in the names of virtue, and I wondered if he ever knew that no gift will ever buy back a man's love when you have removed his self-love. A bribed man can only hate his briber. When this man died, the nation rang with praise, and just beneath, with gladness that he was dead.

There was a third man, who perhaps made many errors in performance, but whose effective life was devoted to making men brave and dignified and good in a time when they were poor and frightened and when there were ugly forces loose in the world to utilize their fears. This man was hated by the few. When he died, the people burst into tears in the streets and their minds wailed, 'What can we do now? How can we go on without him?'

In uncertainty I am certain that underneath their topmost layers of frailty men want to be good and want to be loved. Indeed, most of their vices are attempted shortcuts to love. When a man comes to die, no matter what his talents and influence and genius, if he dies unloved, his life must be a failure to him, and his dying a cold horror. It seems to me that if you or I must choose between two courses of thought or action we should remember our dying so to live that our death brings no pleasure to the world.

We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil. And it occurs to me that evil must constantly re-spawn, while good, while virtue, is immortal. Vice has always a new, fresh young face, while virtue is venerable as nothing else in the world is.

**Footnote from David Tuffley**

Steinbeck is saying here that all human endeavors, all of our thoughts and actions, can be distilled down to a single theme, the on-going struggle within us between good and evil. But before you dismiss this as an over-generalization, take some time to reflect on it. Consider the correspondence with his idea and that of the Physicist, who sees a universe based on positive and negative polarity, of an action leading to an equal and opposite reaction. There is correspondence with the concept of Yin and Yang, in which the universe reinvents itself through cycles of positive and negative energy. There is correspondence with the Hindu and Buddhist concept of Karma that recognizes, like the Physicist, that actions create reactions. There is even correspondence in our own industry; computing is based on binary code. So we have multiple perspectives from Science, Philosophy and Religion that recognize that we exist in a universe that is fundamentally binary in nature.

That this concept of binary reality should be arrived at by so many scientists and philosophers and theologians, over thousands of years, from all manner of cultural backgrounds, points to the likelihood that they are all perceiving and describing in their own way the one underlying, enduring Truth. And that binary nature manifests in the human mind as the concepts of good and evil. A tree or a starfish are neither good nor evil, they just exist. But humans can make themselves either good or evil through their choices. It is our free will that makes it so, our free will that enables us to channel positive or negative energy and so create the reality of our lives.

In terms of creating your own personal set of highly developed ethical standards, the process is facilitated by becoming sufficiently self-aware to perceive the right and wrong in a situation, and then use your freedom of choice to consciously choose the good alternative. I realize that this sounds simplistic, but I believe it really is that simple. Many of us do not have highly developed self-awareness; we simply react in a knee-jerk way through habit or prejudice without thinking through the consequences. It is easier to do this than the method I suggest, it requires less effort.

Another step in the process is to actively develop your ability to connect cause with effect. Move beyond the perception of life as a series of random events to perceive the underlying patterns of cause and effect. If you proceed on the assumption that every action has an equal and opposite reaction, then the things that happen to you can then be perceived as a reaction to an earlier action performed by you, not some random event. This is likely to be a contentious point, but bear with me. Consider the liberating implications of this perspective. You become master of your destiny, proactively creating the future you want by choosing to perform the actions necessary to create that future, keeping in mind the every action has an equal and opposite reaction principal to guide your actions. You have effectively taken full responsibility for what happens in your life. It’s a weighty responsibility, but worth it, considering the benefits.

I’m sure many people reading this will be very uncomfortable with the idea. It runs counter to some religious belief, and it runs counter to the growing cult of the victim discernable in today’s society. If something goes wrong we automatically look for someone to blame, anyone but ourselves. And if there is no one handy to blame, then blame the Government. In the end, the purpose is to create a victim of yourself and then seek compensation.

About the process of discerning the links between cause and effect, I do not imply that this is an easy process; on the contrary it can be difficult as the causal links are sometimes quite obscure, difficult to see. But remember that we are talking about the laws of physics here; they apply equally in all situations. I could quote a litany of religious doctrine in support of this position (karma, reap what you so, etc) but I will keep religion out of this.

Reflect on Steinbeck’s assertion that all human endeavors, all of our thoughts and actions, can be distilled down to a single theme, the on-going struggle within us between good and evil. Your challenge is to develop enough insight into the web of causality that you can *consciously* choose the course of action that will involve good consequences. And in so doing gain more effective control over your life and where you want it to go.